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Checklist for the Participatory Designing of Educational Formats

Derived from work with peers of the project *Understanding Europe*

“**Peer education**” denotes a choice of approach to knowledge transfer that begins from an equal footing. This is why educational programs commensurate with such an approach will be run by young peer trainers whose own experiences can offer concrete **points of connection with the life-worlds** of the participants, their contemporaries.

The peers work with the educational materials provided, in the context of **highly diverse groups**. The participants of educational formats (e.g. pupils) bring varying degrees of interest and motivation to the process, have highly variable background knowledge, and diverse (linguistic) competences as well as social and cultural backgrounds. Through their own educational praxis, peer trainers are able to develop a great deal of **experiential knowledge** for themselves in finding ways to **access and relate to young target groups**. In a participatory process, this practical knowledge can be systematically compiled and utilised.

A **participatory approach of this kind** was implemented in the project Understanding Europe through the concept of **focus groups** on the development of inclusive educational formats. In this context, a focus group is a small unit made up of self-selecting participants who work on key areas of a topic, ideally identified in advance by the peers themselves as being worthy of consideration.

Focus-group work is a professionally **moderated and open-ended process**, in which the participating peer trainers are at all times able to call on feedback. The ongoing discussion process within the group leads to an intensive reflection on the educational work itself and strengthens the capacity to **question one’s own strategies and concepts**. Furthermore, this participatory approach will strengthen **self-efficacy** and a feeling of “ownership” among the participating peers.

We were able to derive the following key points for work in participatory focus groups from the experience gathered in the peer project *Understanding Europe*:

- ✓ ***Peers participate on a voluntary basis at all times***

Sometimes it is difficult for voluntarily participating peers to make a long-term commitment. The value of their participation is not diminished if they only contribute to a part of the process. On the contrary, an engaged peer's perspective on only a single issue could also be very beneficial. For this reason, we recommend an approach based on openness. It does not need to be clear from the beginning who will participate in the process, at what point and for how long. This does by no means constitute an inevitable hindrance to the process but can even stimulate it.
- ✓ ***Creativity requires freedom and stimulation***

It is advisable to set up a spatially and temporally concentrated creative situation at the beginning of the process – a stimulating environment in which the participants are able to enter into direct exchange with one another for at least two days. Providing educational and creative resources from a variety of related fields, as well as using a spatial design that transcends the classic seminar room setup, can also have an inspiring effect.
- ✓ ***Clearly formulate the goal, but be open to the outcome***

For the initiators of a participative material development process, the challenge is to formulate clear requirements as to the direction the group should work towards, while also remaining open to a variety of ideas and potential approaches. In this respect, it makes sense to describe a framework – preferably large – for the process, but also one which is as concrete as possible, so that the participants can work on the project with some degree of certainty. This framework can also be introduced by the moderators.
- ✓ ***Bring together a diversity-oriented working group***

The peers are especially well-prepared to work with diverse learner groups if they are themselves diverse as a group and can incorporate their various backgrounds into the shared reflection on the work process and their role as trainers. Using this as a resource and integrating it into the work done by the focus groups has the particular virtue of making possible a multifaceted conceptualisation of the task, which includes not only experiences from work done in school, but also draws on the participants' biographical backgrounds.

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- ✓ ***Use moderation to structure the process***

Moderation is essential, both for structuring the process and for documenting the results.
 - ✓ ***Sometimes the process is more significant than the outcome***

Of course, the work process is to a large extent oriented towards results. As with all creative processes, however, it is also useful to hold open the possibility of rethinking the results and discarding them when in doubt. This alters nothing about the value of the process itself: the peer trainers are able to contribute their experiences and reflect on them intensively, in both theoretical and communicative terms, and thereby experience themselves as meaningful actors. In this sense, the process itself – relatively independent of the result – is already tremendously effective.
 - ✓ ***Provide resources for innovative formats***

Creative processes tend to stifle rapidly if they are constantly being confronted with practical limitations. In this regard, it is worth planning at the outset for the provision of non-specific, abundant resources that the participants can use to (co-)design educational materials externally. Not every required expertise will automatically be available within the group.
 - ✓ ***Include experts on a basis of equality***

For a peer focus group, the inclusion of external experts can constitute an enormous enrichment. However, it also potentially leads the group into a dilemma. Both focus groups demonstrated that the involvement of experts can completely overturn the work that the peers have already done. At this point, the trainers should be encouraged to productively use the tension between their own ideas and those of the experts, and to meet with them eye-to-eye. The project management is in this case responsible for keeping the original aims of the focus group in view.
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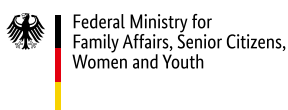
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